

# Educational Needs and Barriers for African Refugee Students in Manitoba

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This study investigated the educational needs and barriers for diverse African refugee students in two inner-city high schools in Manitoba. Forty African refugee students, two principals, eight teachers, four parents, and four community leaders participated in the study. Five focus groups, individual interviews, and school and classroom observations were used to collect data. Results revealed that academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges facing African refugee students adversely affected their ability to integrate and cope well in school, thereby significantly reducing their socio-economic opportunities. Policy implications and urgent reform measures such as forgiveness of refugee resettlement loans and better housing in safer neighbourhoods are suggested.

**Key words:** War-affected African refugee students educational needs, educational barriers, refugee student support programs, social integration and educational success.

Dans cet article, l'auteure analyse les besoins en éducation et les difficultés des élèves réfugiés venant du continent africain et fréquentant deux écoles secondaires situées dans des quartiers pauvres au Manitoba. Quarante élèves africains, tous des réfugiés, deux directeurs d'école, huit enseignants, quatre parents et quatre leaders communautaires ont participé à cette étude. Cinq groupes de discussion, des entrevues individuelles et des séances d'observation dans l'école et en classe ont été utilisés pour réunir les données. Les résultats indiquent que les défis scolaires, économiques et psychosociaux auxquels font face ces jeunes africains réfugiés affectent leur aptitude à bien s'intégrer et s'adapter à l'école, ce qui a pour effet de réduire nettement leurs possibilités socioéconomiques. L'auteure suggère des changements au niveau des politiques ainsi que des mesures de réforme urgentes, telles l'exonération du remboursement des prêts consentis pour l'aide à l'établissement des réfugiés et l'amélioration des conditions de logement et ce, dans des quartiers plus sûrs.

**Mots clés :** besoins en éducation des élèves réfugiés provenant de pays africains en guerre, obstacles à l'éducation, programmes d'assistance à l'intention des élèves réfugiés, intégration sociale, réussite scolaire

Globally, an unprecedented increase in the number of refugee students of African origins in major cities has occurred in countries around the world, especially such countries as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia (Biles, Tolley, & Zamprelli, 2006). Research, however, indicates that this increase has generally not been accompanied by appropriate educational and other specialized support specifically targeted to assist the acculturation, integration, and school success of students who are from war-affected, disrupted schooling backgrounds and whose culture, ethnicity, language, and religion are significantly different from those of the mainstream in the host countries. Sporadically available in some schools are generic refugee support programs that are uninformed by input from the refugees themselves or research on the effectiveness of these programs for particular groups of refugee students (author's observation). This lack of informed and targeted educational support, along with various forms of documented discrimination against African refugee students in host countries (McBrien, 2005) may account for the dramatic school dropout rates and social alienation observed among this group, thereby significantly reducing the economic and social opportunities available to them in their new countries.

This article identifies the educational needs of African refugee students, and recommends what policy-makers, schools, teachers, and other service providers could do to facilitate the acculturation, social integration, and school success of African refugee students in their new countries. The focus and target population of the study is African refugee students in Manitoba, but globally the study's findings have application in countries with similar groups of refugee students.

#### RESEARCH PROBLEM AND STUDY RATIONALE

Manitoba has seen a consistent growth trend since 1998 in both overall immigration and the number of refugee immigrants. Manitoba Labour and Immigration (2006) reported that approximately 8,190 refugees immigrated to Manitoba between 1998 and 2005, with the school-aged population of refugee newcomers (0-24 years) constituting approximately half this number. A noteworthy shift in refugee immigration over the past five years has been the decrease in European countries as source countries of refugees and the rapid increase in African and Middle Eastern countries as major sources (MacKay & Tavares, 2005). According to MacKay and Tavares' study, 7 out of Manitoba's top 10 refugee source countries over the past 5 years have been African countries, representing

well over half the refugee population in Manitoba. That study also noted that the current composition of the refugee population in schools reflects the major source countries currently contributing to the refugee influx in Manitoba: Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. African students, therefore, constitute the highest number of refugee students in Manitoba schools currently. They deserve research attention for three reasons:

1. their unique educational needs as adolescents and youth coming from war-affected and disrupted schooling backgrounds;
2. their unique difficulty with integration due to their phenotype, ethnicity, and linguistic and religious backgrounds; and
3. the higher school dropout rate observed among them that may account for the increase in anti-social behaviours such as criminal gang activity, prostitution, and drug use. (African Communities of Manitoba, Inc. [ACOMI], 2006)

Although all war-affected refugees have suffered multiple traumatic experiences, African refugee youth are more likely than other recent refugee children and youth to be forced into becoming child soldiers with lingering memories of committing or incurring terrible atrocities, or to become sex slaves carrying the scars of their experiences. Because of their race, countries of origin, and lack of power base in Western countries, they are more likely to have spent longer periods of time, sometimes five to eight years, in refugee camps where they received extremely poor support and lived in conditions that contribute to significant and often chronic ailments. They are also more likely to have experienced extended periods of disrupted schooling. These experiences suggest that this group of students may experience greater difficulties adjusting to and integrating into a new society and may be slower in learning academic concepts, skills, and a new language (Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration [PCEII] and Population Research Laboratory, 2001; MacKay & Tavares, 2005). In fact, research by Thomas and Collier (1997) suggests that students with low literacy, interrupted schooling, and traumatic experiences might be expected to take 10 years or more to catch up to average levels of cognitive and academic language.

Historically, Eastern Europeans, fleeing persecution during the cold war, represented traditional refugees to Canada. They tended to be more culturally and ethnically similar to many in the host country and were generally well educated, with skills that their host country valued. Since

the 1990s, however, most refugees fleeing from violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, and other Middle-Eastern countries are unlikely to have high levels of education or skills valued by host countries in the West. Furthermore, many recent refugees to Canada and other Western countries have two additional barriers to overcome: (a) Many are black Africans with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are significantly different from those of the mainstream in the host countries (Caucasian, middle-class, and of European ancestry) and are significantly less proficient in the mainstream languages of their host countries (English or French in Canada); and (b) many refugees from Africa and the Middle East are Moslems, a religious tradition that many in the West have come to fear and despise, associating it with violence and terrorism (Asali, 2003). Anecdotal reports in Canada and studies in the United States (e.g., McBrien, 2005) have uncovered discrimination against new refugees from members of the host culture because of the stigma of Islam, often made conspicuous by the wearing the hijab (the Moslem head scarf), fasting during the month of Ramadan, or finding secluded places for ritual prayers during the day.

These war-affected refugee students lack appropriate and sufficient support programs targeted for them. Sporadically available in some Manitoba communities are generic refugee support programs to facilitate the integration of refugees, but which are uninformed by input from the refugees themselves or research on the effectiveness of these programs for specific groups of refugees (author's observation). Lack of targeted and specialized refugee support programs can impede the ability of refugee students to adjust quickly and to learn, a situation that may account for the higher dropout rate reported among African refugee students in Manitoba (African Communities of Manitoba, Inc (ACOMI) Report, 2006).

This article reports on a year-long study (2006-2007) to examine the educational needs and barriers for African refugee students in Manitoba high schools. Educational needs were defined broadly, including academic, social, psychological, linguistic, and economic, a list that is appropriate for exploratory research of this nature, intended to identify the complex and interrelated conditions that support or undermine African refugee students' ability to succeed in school and participate fully and actively in Manitoba's and Canada's social, economic, cultural, and political life.

## THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Acculturation theories of immigrant psychosocial well-being, adjustment, and integration; Brofenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory of human development; and Rutter's (1999) theory of psychosocial resilience inform this study both theoretically and analytically. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2003) define acculturation as a change in an individual or a culturally similar group that results from contact with a different culture; they make a distinction between psychological and sociological acculturation. At the psychological level, changes can occur in one's sense of identity, values, and beliefs; people may experience acculturation stress such as anxiety and depression as they try to adapt to a new culture. The sociology of immigration recognizes that outcomes for immigrant minorities (including refugee immigrants) are significantly influenced by what Portes and Rumbaut (1990) call a group's mode of incorporation, that is, the context in which immigrants enter, plays a decisive role in their process of adaptation, regardless of the human capital the immigrants may possess. Thus immigrants who receive settlement assistance and are not subject to widespread discrimination are expected to experience a smoother process of social and psychological integration and faster economic progress.

Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory posits three patterns of immigrant adaptation into a new society: (a) the straight line theory of upward mobility in which newcomers assimilate into the Caucasian, middle-class majority; (b) upward mobility and ethnic solidarity found in successful ethnic enclaves that have established themselves through government and social policies; and (c) a third unsuccessful pattern consisting of a downward spiral resulting in assimilation into poverty, often in an inner city underclass. Portes and Zhou noted that refugees arriving since the 1980s are less likely to blend than their predecessors because of their racial and ethnic origins. Without significant social and economic support, recent refugee children and youth are especially vulnerable to this unsuccessful pattern of acculturation. Extending their earlier work, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) posited three contextual factors on which segmented assimilation patterns are dependent: (a) the pace at which children and parents acculturate, (b) cultural and economic barriers confronted by immigrant youth, and (c) resources (family and community) available to manage the barriers.

Brofenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory of human development helps to better explicate the contextual factors articulated by Portes and

Rumbaut (2001). Brofenbrenner's (2005) theory states that human development is a consequence of an individual's personal attributes (e.g., biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics) and the environments or contexts in which an individual lives. Brofenbrenner characterizes the environment as a system of five nested structures operating as systems both within themselves and in relation to each other:

1. The first and innermost structure is the *individual* (in this study, the African refugee student).
2. The second structure, labeled as the *microsystem*, is the immediate "proximal setting" with which the individual interacts directly (e.g., family, the school, teachers, friends, and objects/ symbols / processes of the home).
3. The third is the *mesosystem* consisting of the environment in which two or more microsystem settings interact (e.g., interactions and relationships between the home and the school).
4. The fourth structure, the *exosystem*, influences an individual's behaviour and development yet is composed of contexts in which a developing individual is not directly involved (e.g., policies of a school division).
5. The fifth and outermost structure which is most removed from the individual is the *macrosystem* which is the level of cultural ideologies, macro-institutions, laws, and public policies that impinge on the individual (e.g., policies from ministries of education, political or academic views on refugee integration).

These five systems influence and shape an individual's developmental process. Individuals, however, differ in their receptivity and response to specific environmental factors, owing to their unique characteristics and bio-psychological resources. Brofenbrenner, therefore, conceives of learning and development as a complex reciprocal interaction between an active, bio-psychological individual and the immediate environment.

Rutter (1999), drawing on Brofenbrenner's earlier works for his research on children who escaped from their impoverished childhoods to develop accomplished and successful lives came to the conclusion that a key component of healthy development was the cultivation of psychosocial resilience which is a combination of two factors: personal resources and social resources. Personal resources include dispositions such as maturity, self-reliance, self-understanding, and the belief that it is possible to deal well with adversity and stressful situations and to shape one's own life. Social resources, a measure of social integration,

include good, confident social relationships with family and friends, and access to support networks.

The factors described in these various frameworks ultimately affect refugee youth's access to education and opportunity and were drawn upon to inform the research questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation for this study.

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Three specific research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What do African refugee students need to succeed in Manitoba schools?
2. What are the barriers to their school success?
3. What kinds of interventions are needed to overcome these barriers?

The target group for this study was war-affected African refugee students in Winnipeg high schools, specifically refugee students from Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia, selected not only because these are the source countries for a large proportion of Manitoba's newcomer students of refugee origins but also because of the significance of the challenges they pose for educators, schools, and the Manitoba community. Students who had lived in Canada for five years or fewer were selected from two Winnipeg high schools identified as having the highest concentration (about 20 per cent of the total school population of about 1,200 for each school) of refugee students from Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, or Somalia. Other research participants were the two principals of the schools, eight teachers (four from each school), eight refugee parents, and four community leaders from the targeted ethnic communities.

#### *Data Collection*

Focus groups, school and classroom observations, and individual interviews were used to investigate the research questions.

*Focus groups.* To obtain initial exploratory data on the views of the African refugee students regarding the three research questions, audio-taped, focus-group interviews were conducted in each of the schools among 20 randomly selected, war-affected, African refugee students from the targeted ethnic communities – a total of 40 students from grades 10-12, with ages ranging from 17 to 24 years. Each focus group constituted five students. The focus groups explored open-ended ques-

tions on issues such as (a) the students' pre-migration war experiences and trans-migration refugee camp experiences and any impact these experiences had on their learning and psychosocial adjustment, (b) post-migration experiences in Canada, (c) barriers to social integration and school success in Canada, and (d) interventions needed to help them integrate and succeed in school.

*School and classroom observations.* To assess the school acculturation/acclimatization of the refugee students, extended school and classroom observations (12 weeks in each school) were carried out. The research team observed the same class for each teacher once a week for one hour. In each school, 10 randomly selected male and female refugee students from each of the four targeted ethnic groups were observed. The principal researcher collected field notes on classroom interactions between these students and their teachers, the frequency and quality of class participation, participation in recreational and organized sports and voluntary activities, and interactions with peers and others in a variety of school settings. Opportunistic interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) were conducted, where warranted, during the observations to throw light on anything emerging of importance to the study.

*Individual interviews.* For fuller exploration and understanding of the data from the focus groups and the observations, and also to allow for the emergence of any additional relevant data, individual one-hour interviews were conducted with 10 students in each of the two schools (a total of 20 students). Individual interviews were also conducted with the two school principals, eight teachers, eight parents, and four community leaders; participants were selected on their willingness to participate. Principals' interviews focused on policies and programs they had in place to meet the needs of war-affected, African, refugee students, perceptions of the effectiveness of these programs for meeting their needs, challenges and successes in meeting their needs, and additional programming needed. Teachers' interviews explored similar questions but also included questions on teachers' knowledge about the backgrounds of their African refugee students, teacher beliefs about the abilities, successes, or otherwise, of these students; and efforts teachers had made to adapt their curricula and teaching methods to this group of students. Parent interviews explored topics such as aspirations and expectations they have for their children's education, support systems available to parents (family and community) for helping their children achieve these aspirations, challenges to parents' own acculturation and integration,



perceptions of their role as parents and of their involvement in their children's education, and supports they needed for successful parenting in their new culture. Community leaders were interviewed about refugee youth support services available in their communities, initiatives undertaken to address youth challenges emerging in their ethnic communities, and support they needed to guide their youth in their new country. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

#### *Data Analysis*

Transcribed data were read several times, segmented into meaningful analytical units, and coded, using both a priori codes (previously developed, based on the research questions and the theoretical and analytical frameworks described earlier), and inductive codes generated directly from examining the data. Categories and themes were then developed and analyzed. Research reports, based on the analyses and interpretations of data, were prepared and returned to the research participants for "member checks" to establish credibility, reliability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings suggested that multiple, complex, and interrelated factors interact to pose challenges or barriers to successful schooling and social integration for war-affected African refugee students. These challenges were clustered into three themes or categories: academic challenges, economic challenges, and psychosocial challenges.

#### *Academic Challenges*

Students described the opportunity to live in peace in Canada and go to school as "unbelievable"; "like winning the lotto [lottery]"; and "a great blessing." However, they also described this blessing as "mixed" because of several factors that interacted to pose academic challenges for them. These factors included:

1. lack of academic support at home (e.g., "...there is no computer at our house"; "my father used to help me with schoolwork but he has moved to Calgary for his work.");
2. separation from family ("my mother disappeared during the war; she used to provide the boundaries we needed");

3. cultural dissonance, including academic culture dissonance ("academic expectations here are different");
4. acculturation stress; difficulty with academic skills (e.g., note-taking, studying, academic writing, critical thinking, literacy and numeracy, and organizational skills);
5. limited English language proficiency ("sometimes, I don't understand what I am reading in the social studies textbook");
6. academic gaps due to disrupted schooling ("we were in Conakry [a refugee camp in Africa] for five years and I was not going to a real school");
7. fast-paced curriculum ("the teachers go too fast, we don't understand");
8. fear and distrust of authority figures like teachers ("so instead, I ask other African students for help");
9. fear of speaking out in class ("because I do not have Canadian accent"); and
10. grade placement based on age and English language assessment tests rather than academic ability.

Among these factors, separation from family and grade placement were ranked highly on the students' list of frustrations. Separation from family not only created acute loneliness for many of the students but also robbed them of the role models who had provided the example, stability, and structures needed to thrive academically. Several of the students reported living with single parents or on their own, having lost their parents and coming to Canada as "unaccompanied minors." Others were living in reconstituted families consisting of friends they had made while in transition in refugee camps. Some students had hoped that the school would provide the boundaries and structures they lacked at home. That hope, however, quickly vanished when they found out that "Here [Canada] the school system is really slack [lax]; nobody asks or cares if you did not do your homework.") Without the structures to which they were accustomed, many of the students reported becoming lost in the Canadian academic culture.

Students also reported frustration with their school's assessment and placement of refugee youth and called for better monitoring and practices:

When we fled from Ethiopia, we lived in Kenya for almost 10 years and I was going to school there. When we came here two years ago, they placed me in

grade 9 instead of grade 11. They said it was because of my age and my English language test result, so I was repeating most of what I had already learned in science and math in Kenya – very frustrating . . . and we are not given enough time and support to learn English before the tests. (Ethiopian refugee student)

By the time we were finally accepted to come to Canada last year, I was already 17 years old and they put me in grade 11 when we arrived . . . even though I was not going to school for almost five years, so grade 11 is very tough for me . . . but they put me with the others at grade 9 for learning English. (Sudanese refugee student)

The Prairie Centre of Excellence's (2001) study of Kosovar refugees in Northern Alberta supports the findings from our study on student placement. The Centre's study revealed that over 50 per cent of refugee youth aged 15 to 18 years arriving in Canada were placed in inappropriate grades. Ten per cent of the students interviewed for our study felt that they had been placed in grades too low or too easy for them, while 20 per cent felt that their grade placement was too high or too difficult. These students called for better ways to assess refugee students' academic abilities and placements, for example, by giving them time and resource support to acquire proficiency in the English language before testing and placing them in grades.

Like the teachers in MacKay and Tavares' (2005) study, the teachers in this research expressed great interest in, and hope for, the academic success of their African refugee students. Individual teachers reported investing considerable time and resources in these students by, for example, (a) "coming to school at 7:30 a.m. just to make myself available for extra help which I know they need" (grade-11 mathematics teacher); (b) "using my own money to purchase culturally appropriate books and other curriculum resources" (language arts teacher); and (c) "I have attended two training workshops on war-affected refugee students" (grade-10 social studies teacher). Such interest notwithstanding, five of the eight teachers in this study referred to the intensification of their work because they had new roles and responsibilities as psychological counselors, social workers, and life-coaches who had to show the students how to survive in Canadian society (e.g., "grocery shopping," "showing them how to visit a doctor when they come to school ill," "dressing appropriately for the cold weather," and "teaching them basic standards of hygiene"). Although many of the teachers resented these new roles, referring to them as "non-academic," one female teacher

seemed to embrace the roles. She described her classroom as “a drop-in centre” where African refugee students came to “hang out,” chatted with her about personal issues in their lives, or picked up information about jobs and refugee/new immigrant services in the city. School observation and an opportunistic interview with a few students in her classroom confirmed her claim. For example, a Sudanese student said: “I come here during lunch to meet other Sudanese students and to . . . just talk.” In Brofenbrenner’s (2005) bio-ecological framework, this teacher exemplifies individuals in the microsystem (the school) who create conditions to support the development of individuals (i.e., the African refugee students). However, this teacher commented that this kind of individual initiative, without institutional support, was “exhausting” and suggested that this initiative should become “a well-planned systemic response” by the school divisions (the exosystem) and made available to refugee learners across schools.

An interesting finding of this study was that although the student population in the schools in this study was changing, many of the eight teachers observed for this study did not adapt their curricula, instruction, assessment, and interaction patterns to this changing population. Whether teachers did or did not reconceptualize and change their practice when faced with this new group of students depended, to a large extent, on their teaching goals, beliefs about student capability, conceptions of subject matter, views about how students learn, and racial and cultural awareness. Regardless of the courses/subjects they taught, teachers in this study who believed in the high capability of students saw their subject matter as vehicles for enhancing students’ personal and academic growth rather than as cut and dried immutable content to be transmitted to students, held themselves responsible for motivating students to learn, fostered nurturing professional relationships with students, and considered their own and their students’ racial and cultural backgrounds, and were more likely to adapt their curricula and pedagogical practices than those who did not. These data confirm Stodolsky and Grossman’s (2000) finding that the tendency for teachers to adapt or not to adapt to a new student population correlated with individual factors such as goals, subject matter beliefs, and pedagogical preferences. Overall, teachers expressed the need for extended support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and professional development opportunities to provide knowledge (e.g., cultural knowledge and pre- and trans-migration experiences) about their African refugee students and

how best to teach them. However, as one teacher interviewee observed, "In preparing primarily white mainstream teachers to teach diverse learners, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions may matter as much as knowledge." This observation calls into question the lack of emphasis that current teacher education programs place on cultural competence in preparing teacher candidates to teach academic content to diverse learners. Necessary as multicultural understandings are, they appear to be insufficient to help teacher educators fully understand what equips teachers to respond successfully to diverse learners.

The principals in this study described several ways in which their schools have responded to the needs of refugee students. For example, one principal reported the following initiatives in his schools: (a) the opening of a refugee transition centre where refugee students are taught Canadian life skills, (b) funding for teachers to attend training workshops on war-affected, refugee students, (c) introduction of a flexible program to provide workplace preparation, (d) after-school programs for students, parents, and other community members, (e) hiring of two, Arabic-speaking Sudanese persons as Educational Assistants, (f) support for a Sudanese students' community centre in the school, (g) hiring a full-time clinical psychologist and a part-time social worker, (h) working with the Needs Centre for Refugees and the International Centre for New Immigrants, and (i) ensuring inclusive practices such as opening the drama, choir, and basketball programs to interested refugee students. The other principal in this study also reported a refugee transition centre and an after-school program for refugee parents, students, and community members. As the principals explained, these initiatives had been made possible largely as a result of strenuous resource re-allocations rather than new provincial funding. Because of these resource constraints, the principals felt that key decision makers and policy makers constituting the macro-system must be made aware of the unique challenges involved in educating refugee students so that funding can be provided for programs to support the adjustment and academic success of these students – for example, professional development for school administrators and teachers of refugee students, extended English language programs, smaller EAL classes, EAL resource centres where students can go for immediate help with academic writing, hiring of more EAL Education Assistants, expansion of the after-school and community programs, specialized curriculum for bridging academic gaps (developed at the school level), and hiring of specialized staff members to liaise

between the school and ethnic communities, to support refugee students, and to direct them to refugee services outside the school. Both principals referred to the need for additional resources and opportunities not traditionally provided to schools. For example, to cultivate continued academic progress for refugee students, schools now have to reach out to their communities at the end of the school day to provide not just the customary enrichment opportunities for students but also parent and community education. One principal described his school's financial struggle to provide not only English language support for refugee parents but also instruction in technology, child-care in Canada, and other programs designed to improve the school's community as a whole. One principal described such outreach programs, representing interactions between two or more settings in the mesosystem (in this case, between the school and the home communities of its students) as

crucial because these skills build parents' confidence, strengthen family and community capacity, and directly support the school's effort to bridge refugee students' educational gaps; they should therefore be part and parcel of welcoming refugees to our city and not loading it [financial responsibility] off to the schools. (high school principal)

Parents in this study expressed high aspirations for the academic success of their children in their new country. However, parents cited several personal factors negatively affecting their students' academic success: preoccupation with economic survival (three of the eight parents in this study were juggling two or three menial jobs), slower pace of acculturation and adaptation compared to their children, limited English language proficiency, and cultural differences in expectations of parental involvement in their children's schooling. Interviews with the parents and the school personnel (the teachers and the principals) revealed great dissonance in the mesosystem with respect to expectations of parental involvement. On one hand, the school expected parents to be more involved in the education of their children than was forthcoming (e.g., "having actual contact with the school"; "attending parent-teacher meetings"; "responding to school notices"; and "ensuring that homework is done"). The parents, on the other hand, perceived their involvement as being limited to the home front and considered it culturally inappropriate (on their part) to interfere with the role and work of the teachers whom they treated with reverence and held in high esteem. Clearly, there is need for dialogue between the two parties comprising the meso-

system (the home and the school) so that each party comes to a clearer understanding of what the other party is equipped to provide to support the learning of African refugee students.

Community leaders listed successes – for example, a few refugee students have made it to university, soccer clubs have been created to provide recreation, various ethnic community centres have been opened, and summer classes provide academic support, culturally appropriate counseling, and teaching African values (such as respect for parents and elders). Funding from local agencies like the Winnipeg Foundation have made these initiatives possible; the community leaders have appealed to the provincial and municipal governments for financial support for more of these efforts. As one of the community leaders put it,

These facilities were initiated by us, based on our needs. The facilities we found in place are empty and underutilized on an average day. They are not relevant to our needs and interests. For example, our kids do not play hockey and there is no one to teach them hockey. (community leader)

These successful initiatives are particularly significant for their overall contribution to the enhancement of the social capital of African refugee students (for example, the advancement of some of them to university) and their economic and social success. Conversely the challenges that the community leaders listed, such as the increased number of African youth in jail for drugs and other crimes, dramatically reduce the social capital of African communities. Interestingly, although community effort has produced recreational facilities such as soccer for male African youth, comparable facilities have not been provided for the female youth, highlighting the gender bias in favour of boys' socio-emotional well-being and academic success that is still prevalent in some African communities.

#### *Economic Challenges*

Examined through the theoretical lenses of Portes and Rumbaut's (1990) mode of incorporation and Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) and Brofenbrenner's (2005) contextual factors (e.g., cultural and economic barriers), the research data suggest that lack of economic resources available to the refugee students and their families posed a severe challenge for social integration and educational success for the students. More than half the 40 students who participated in this study reported holding full-time jobs (either from 4:00 p.m. till midnight or from 11:00 p.m. till 7:00 a.m.)

to support themselves and surviving family members in Africa, and to repay or help parents and relatives repay money (loans) that the Canadian federal government has spent on their airfares, initial housing, and other refugee resettlement programs. Balancing eight hours of work each day with academic work was simply exhausting, as one student indicated:

I am always tired. Things are harder in Canada than we thought. I get home every night past midnight, after the cinema where I work closes and I have to catch two buses. I have no time or energy to study or do my homework . . . and I have to get up at 6:00 a.m. to be in school for 8:30. No, I am not getting good grades . (student)

The teachers agreed that a direct correlation occurred between the poor academic performance of the refugee students and the long hours spent on their full-time jobs.

Math needs practice, even for those who have an aptitude for it. If you don't have time to practise math, you are not likely to pass it. (math teacher)

We have an after-school program for academic support in science, EAL, math, etc. The thing is that the African students who need the program most don't take advantage of it; they are all rushing off to work as soon as the last bell goes. . . . Some may need the money to support themselves, I agree, but many others put in those long hours simply to be able to buy expensive clothes and gadgets . . . they [African refugee students] need someone to help them set the right priorities; first things first . (grade-11 mathematics teacher)

The few students who said they were not working or were working only on weekends (e.g., "for my own pocket money") were the lucky ones who lived with two working parents or with first generation immigrant relatives who had sponsored them to come to Canada as refugees. According to Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) list of factors affecting segmented assimilation, these students' receptive situation has been welcoming and positive, providing them with the social resources (Rutter, 1999) they need to stay focused on school.

Poverty also explains why many of these students and their families remain restricted to government-subsidized housing, often in rough, inner-city neighborhoods that the students characterized as "tough," "full of gangs," and "drug and prostitution activities." The students re-



ported living in constant fear of the gangs and drug dealers in their neighborhoods. According to one of the school principals in this study,

They [drug dealers and gang leaders] prey on innocent new arrivals like refugee youth who have no firm support base and are looking for easy money and somewhere to belong. In this community, we have the African Mafia and the African Mad Cowz [gangs] and 20 other gangs. Gang behaviour is similar in a lot of ways to what these students are familiar with from their war and refugee camp experiences. In some perverse way, that's attractive for them. For many of them violence is not a scary proposition and that's what scares me. We need resources to strengthen and expand our after-school and community programs – academic and recreational – to keep these kids away from gangs. (high school principal)

### *Psychosocial Challenges*

The psychosocial well-being of refugees includes their overcoming of traumatic experiences, acquiring a sense of safety and a sense of self, and adjusting to expectations of the new culture while being able to retain cherished values of the homeland (McBrien, 2005; Portes & Stepick, 1993). According to McBrien (2005), most discussions of psychosocial adjustment of refugees often point to the difficulties of moving on from traumatic memories. McBrien's review indicated that after five years, nearly 70 per cent of refugees from war-affected backgrounds retained stressful memories of the war and their flight from their homeland and 80 per cent had serious concerns about their separation from missing family members. Once resettled, adults often had to take lower-skilled jobs with less status than the jobs they had in their home countries. In addition, culturally different gender role expectations and reversal of the roles played by parents and children in the old country often added new stresses on families.

These psychosocial stresses were certainly present among the refugee students and their families interviewed for this study. Many students recounted horrific pre-migration and trans-migration experiences. For example, all four of the Sudanese students recalled frequent night raids on their refugee camps in Kakuma Camp (set up in one of the poorest locations in Kenya to serve refugees from diverse African countries) in which some of their parents and other close relatives were killed. Two of the four interviewee students from Sierra Leone reported witnessing the maiming of children during that country's 11-year civil war "by chopping off their hands" simply to inflict *nambara* (debilitation and

intimidation) on the country's next generation. Many knew young boys who were abducted as child-soldiers and girls who were either abducted into becoming "bush wives" for the rebel fighters or were subjected to rape and other frequent sexual assaults while in refugee camps.

Since arriving in Canada, neither the refugee students nor their families have received treatment or been provided with programs and services to deal with these traumas. These experiences were, therefore, still vivid in the students' minds and were fragmenting them psychologically and interfering with their learning (e.g., one teacher reported that the school's routine fire drill so stressed a Sudanese student that he was hospitalized). In recognition of this medical need, one of the principals called for psychological counselling programs "that are right here in the school and not out there somewhere in some far-off community." The second principal, who pointed out the isolation existing among the various service providers, suggested that "educators, housing, family, and social service providers come together and function holistically to provide effective service to the students." Clearly, reforms are needed in the mesosystem serving the students.

School and classroom observations in the two schools revealed cracks in the microsystem of the school as well. African refugee students often cited isolation, exclusion, and loneliness as sources of psychosocial stress. Observations revealed that interactions between African refugee students and their non-African peers were limited to pair or small group work in the classroom. African refugee students interacted mainly with each other; many spent a large part of the school day in isolated EAL classes with other African refugee students. Several male students reported not being able to participate in their schools' sports because "we are not familiar with the sports, except soccer and there is no more room on the team this year." The girls also reported non-participation in sports due to both cultural reasons and lack of familiarity with what their school had to offer (e.g., "There is a recreational dancing room but I can't go in there and start dancing with boys"). The isolation caused by these exclusions, along with perceived racism among some Caucasian Canadian students, teachers, and administrators were identified as sources of psychosocial stress leading to a damaged sense of self. A male Moslem student from Somalia expressed his frustration this way: "I still do not feel like I am part of this school. For example, where is the place for Moslem students to go for prayers in this school? Where are our own ethnic foods in the school cafeteria?"

Evidence of stress from psychological acculturation (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2003) also emerged in the microsystem of the family as students and their parents cited challenges in the new culture to cherished values and changed family relationships. For example, two female students cited cultural differences in gender role expectations as causing them pressure from their parents to quit school and get married. Another female student mentioned frequent fights with her parents over wearing the hijab and pressure to return to the homeland for female circumcision. Perceived loss of parental authority in the new country was frequently cited as a constant source of emotional stress, particularly among the male African adults in this study. One male parent identified the source of his frustration this way: "In this country, children come first, then the woman, then the dog, and then the men in that order of importance. Men come last. I have lost my manhood and my children in this culture."

Lack of recognition of their prior learning and professional qualifications has often meant low-status menial jobs for the adults in the families in this study, while lack of proficiency in the English language has led some parents to become dependent on their children (who acculturate and pick up the new language faster) for every day activities such as visiting the doctor, banking, or sorting out utility bills (role reversal). Full- or part-time work has given children unprecedented financial independence. This independence, along with "the permissiveness in this [Canadian] culture," and "so-called children's rights," were all cited as eroding parental authority in the family. With nowhere to go for advice or support, parents often suffered their frustrations in silence.

When asked to identify the support they would need in their new country to guide their youth successfully, both the parents and community leaders appealed to the state (the police) to stop its recrimination of African parents who try to discipline their children "the African way. After all, they have their own culture and we have ours." These strained relationships have added new stresses on refugee families, leaving the adults significantly ill-equipped to provide the emotional support and positive models that their children or wards need to succeed socially and academically.

Despite the academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges faced by the African refugee students in this study, none of them was considering dropping out of school before completing high school. Many of them knew African refugee students who had dropped out because of the

“easy money” from gang and drug activities and prostitution, and were now in jail. Without significant help at the levels of both the micro and macrosystems, these dropouts are likely to fall into Portes and Zhou’s (1993) downward spiral resulting in assimilation into an inner-city under-class. The students in this study appeared determined to avoid such a downward spiral. They demonstrated optimism and remarkable faith in education as their socio-economic ladder. Many aspired to become successful professionals capable of contributing to their new country. Much of their resilience came from the students’ own personal resources (Rutter, 1999) such as their maturity and self-reliance, and their passionate belief that they will use the opportunities offered in Canada to develop successful lives. They attributed their faith and aspirations to the involvement of their families on the home front, whether in person or through letters and long-distance telephone conversations. This involvement was often in the form of advice and encouragement to stay in school and an emphasis on the value of school, which has allowed the students to view school as valuable. The students whose parents and family members were involved in their education in this way reported that, over time, they had come to internalize the value of school so that they were motivated by both intrinsic rewards (feeling of being personally valued and important) and extrinsic rewards (the material rewards of education and avoidance of shaming their family).

The interventions/suggestions that the students proposed were, for the most part, directed at improving the school contexts and assisting youth from war-affected backgrounds. These included (a) a plea to their teachers for adjustment of pace and curriculum content (“slow down in class, especially in math and science, so that we can understand the lessons and not end up dropping the class as so many African students have done”); (b) culturally appropriate sports/recreation programs (soccer was a popular suggestion); (c) access to culturally appropriate psychological counselling; (d) patience and academic support from some teachers; (e) academic peer coaching by more capable African students; (f) extended English language support (“even after we join regular classes”); (g) less racism from some teachers, school administrators, and Canadian-born students; (h) making the school a more welcoming place for refugees; and (i) better practices with regard to grade placement.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the national and ethnic variation among the students targeted in this study, their common experiences as refugee students from war-affected countries and disrupted schooling produced remarkable parallels in their educational needs and challenges for their integration and school success. Clearly, untreated pre- and trans-migration psychological stresses and post-migration academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges affected the ability of the African refugee students to adapt and acculturate into their host country and cope well with school work. When these challenges are compounded by perceived, or real, attitudes of prejudice, marginalization, and racism from fellow-students, teachers, and administrators, refugee students' confidence and self concept are severely challenged and the stage is set for feelings of rejection, inadequacy, frustration, and dropping out even when dropping out is not intended. Parents' beliefs about parenting and authority and the parents' own acculturation challenges and confusion in their quest for social integration and economic survival become obstacles to the school success of their children. Lack of sufficient resources available to schools and isolation among the various service providers – educators, housing and family services, and healthcare personnel – can severely impair the ability of these agencies to provide the services needed to support war-affected refugee students.

### *Implications*

These data suggest the need for improvements both at the level of the macrosystem (federal and provincial governments) and the microsystem (the school, families). At the macrosystem level, the federal government needs to put policies in place to minimize the educational, economic, and psychosocial challenges that emerged in this study. For example, significant increase in the number of Canadian immigration personnel in African countries/regions will accelerate the processes of refugee screening and acceptance for resettlement in Canada, thereby reducing wait-time in refugee camps and periods of disrupted schooling. Improved modes of incorporation, for example, forgiveness of federal government loans for refugee resettlement and recognition of foreign credentials in some trades or professions and opportunity for upgrading in others (to meet Canadian standards) will reduce the economic burden on refugee families and increase refugee parents' chances to access high-wage jobs and reduce economic and psychosocial stress on families.

Judging by projected labour market needs in Manitoba (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2006), the province has a high stake in the educational success of new immigrant youth, including African refugee students whose number has been on a steady increase over the past seven years. Therefore, the province must increase its financial and other resource support to improve the microsystem inhabited by these students, the school, and families. Psychological treatment programs that allow the refugees to draw upon resources in their own cultural communities and better housing in safer neighbourhoods will increase the well-being and safety of refugee students and reduce their level of psychosocial stress. Better coordination of refugee support services, based on informed dialogue among the various service providers and the refugees themselves, will ensure more effective services. In addition, increased provincial funding to schools will strengthen their capacity to provide the specialized programming needed for the education of refugee students – for example, extended and expanded EAL and community support programs and professional development for teachers and school administrators.

For their part, schools, as the microsystem identified as a key element in the socialization and acculturation of refugee youth (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Rutter, 2003, 2006), have already undertaken several initiatives in response to the needs of refugee students but must do more to live up to their rhetoric about diversity and inclusiveness and reduce some of the academic and psychosocial challenges identified in this study. For example, inclusive practices such as expanding the cultural bases of the school's recreational sports and cafeteria food items, and providing prayer rooms for Moslem students will validate and affirm cultural diversity. Better practices in initial assessment and grade placement and continued monitoring of placements will reduce frustration among refugee students and increase motivation for learning. A better understanding of refugee parents' situation (e.g., parents' preoccupation with economic survival and cultural differences in expectations about parental involvement with the school) will reduce misunderstanding between parents and teachers and administrators and develop better community relations. Because patterns of segregation affect social networks, which in turn affect educational access and achievement (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007), desegregation of EAL students from Canadian-born peers will increase inter-group interaction, enhance African refugee students' social capital, and increase their confidence. As

suggested in the literature (e.g., Stodolksy & Grossman, 2000), and confirmed in this study, professional development training is needed to improve teachers' knowledge about and attitudes toward this new group of students; appropriate professional development will also help teachers deconstruct their own cultural and intellectual situatedness in the curriculum and pedagogy of formal schooling. Such training will increase teachers' personal and collective efficacy and may translate into adaptations in curriculum and instructional practices for the benefit of African refugee students. Finally, efforts by the school to collect and disseminate accurate information and cultural knowledge about African refugee students may reduce prejudice and change negative attitudes among teachers, school administrators, and Canadian-born peers. In addition to cultural knowledge about students, however, teachers need to develop a broader vision that encompasses multifaceted teaching goals and beliefs about subject matter and students. In this regard, building a strong professional community and maintaining conversations within schools about responding to diverse student populations can provide the necessary support and resources for teachers as they embark on new practices to serve all students.

This study provides educators with a better understanding of the larger contexts of refugee students' schooling (e.g., their backgrounds, life and family circumstances, pre- and post-migration experiences, barriers to social integration, acculturation, and educational success, and what educators, service providers, and policy-makers can do to meet the challenges of educating war-affected, African, refugee students. The study is, however, limited to the extent that it included only war-affected African refugee students in one Canadian province, Manitoba, where, as the data reveal, refugee support resources were severely limited. Future research should consider similar studies in Canadian jurisdictions with similar groups of students but with more generous, better informed, and better coordinated refugee support services to assess the impact of such support on social integration and educational success among war-affected, African, refugee students.

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